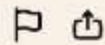




Chapter 77



[POV Neferet]

Afternoon light filters through alabaster screens, casting warm patterns on the chamber floor. Golden lines seem to hold us in this quiet, serious moment.

I sit beside Amen on the low couch, my hands folded tightly in my lap. My knuckles shine white like smooth limestone.

Even though I try to stay calm, a small tremble moves up my arms.

Amen's skin looks pale beneath its bronze tone, like old papyrus left in the sun too long. His breathing is shallow and quick.

The royal collar at his throat rises and falls with each difficult breath. The dark kohl around his eyes makes them look sunken, shadows that show he is suffering more than any mortal should.

I force myself to look upon what I have wrought.

"Everything I've done to help you," I begin, my voice barely stirring the incense-laden air between us, "everything we performed, my blood I've shared... it wasn't healing you."

The words taste like bitter herbs on my tongue. I make myself meet his gaze – those dark eyes that have looked upon me with desire, with tenderness, with absolute trust.

"It was actually harming you. Weakening you."

Amen stares at me, disbelief etching new lines into his face, aging him before my eyes.

"That's not possible," he says, each word measured and deliberate.

"It's always worked – stabilized Osiris's fragment; only your presence grounded me, even the drop of your blood gave me strength."

"Temporarily," I acknowledge, watching understanding dawn across his features. "But each time, Seth was using our connection to slowly poison Osiris's essence within you. Weakening your life forces..."

My voice breaks on the final syllable, the sound fracturing like pottery dropped from too great a height.

A priestess should maintain composure, should deliver even the most terrible oracles with steadiness. But I am no longer truly a priestess, am I?

I am a vessel, a conduit, a betrayer of the very man I have sworn to save from his fate.

Horror changes Amen's face.

It is not the quick fear of sudden danger but the slow, heavy weight of doom realized too late. His shoulders bend inward a little, like a man carrying an invisible burden that grows heavier with every breath.

"You mean every time we thought you were helping me..."

"...I was unknowingly enabling Seth's influence," I say, tears rising in my eyes, hot like the desert sun.

They hang on my lower lashes, holding back for now.

"My blood magic and our closeness created perfect pathways between the divine fragments we each carry. Seth has been using those pathways not only to strengthen his hold on me but also to slowly weaken Osiris's presence within you."

The salt of my tears stings my eyes as Amen rises slowly from the couch.

His movements are no longer graceful. The strong, smooth way he moved when we first met in the marketplace has faded, leaving only a faint memory of power as he walks across the chamber with unsteady steps.

"That's why my condition worsens so quickly now," he says, his voice taking on the distant quality of a man working through complex calculations. "The temporary relief masks the deeper damage being done."

I nod miserably, the motion finally dislodging my tears. They trace warm paths down my cheeks, mapping my shame for all to witness.

"Seth has been patient, working slowly over months, ensuring neither of us would suspect until it was too late."

Too late. The words hang in the air between us, heavy as funeral incense.

The floor feels unsteady beneath my feet as I rise to cross the chamber to where Amen stands, framed against the afternoon light. His silhouette seems smaller somehow, diminished by knowledge that cannot be unlearned.

I reach for his hand with tentative fingers, half-expecting him to pull away from my poisoned touch.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, my tears flowing freely now, each one a silent testament to my unwitting treachery. "I thought I was saving you, truly believed that..."

For a long, heavy moment, Amen stands still, looking toward the balcony where Egypt stretches out before him. This is the kingdom he promised to protect, the people who rely on his divine strength.

to protect, the people who rely on his divine strength.

Then suddenly, he pulls me close, holding me tight against his chest. It feels like he wants to keep me safe from the gods' plans by sheer will alone.

"It's not your fault, you couldn't have known," he murmurs into my hair, his lips warm against my temple. "You were giving anything you could even suggest just to keep me alive... That's all that matters to me, my sweet lotus flower."

I cling to Amen as a drowning sailor might clutch at floating debris after a shipwreck, knowing it offers only temporary salvation yet unable to release it.

My fingers dig into the fine linen of his robes, feeling the solid warmth of him beneath – the mortal man obscured by divine burden, the lover hidden beneath the mantle of Pharaoh.

A new understanding forms between us, crystallizing in the salt of shared tears and the commingling of ragged breath.

Our love – the sacred fire we have nurtured against all odds, the precious connection that has sustained us through challenges and sacrifice – has been Seth's weapon all along.

End *of* *The* **Chapter**

Chapter 77



Comments



Gifts